UNITED NATIONS

# WORLD CHRONICLE

**PROGRAMME:** No. 506, recorded 23 March 1993

**GUEST:** **DR. WILFRIED KREISEL**
**Director, Division of Environmental Health**
**World Health Organization**

**JOURNALISTS:** Ian Steele, The Press Foundation of Asia
Yvette Collymore, Inter Press Service
Anthony Goodman, Reuters

**MODERATOR:** Michael Littlejohns

## WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

Dr. Wilfried Kreisel, Director of the Division of Environmental Health for the World Health Organization (WHO), highlights WHO's activities in protecting the environment while improving health conditions of communities, particularly in third world countries. Sound development is not possible without a healthy population. Dr. Kreisel believes that education, housing and public works are basic requirments for achieving health and safeguarding the environment. He asserts that environmental control measures, such as water and sanitation, are indispensable to curb communicable diseases. Dr. Kreisel does not believe that nuclear energy is suitable for developing countries due to saftey reasons and the lack of economic and political stablity in many of those countries.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Information Products Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 27'57"
Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Ellen McGuffie

**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is WORLD CHRONICLE, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's WORLD CHRONICLE.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

Over the last few decades, development has been the aim of nations around the globe. It is unfortunate that development often affects the environment in a way that causes or exacerbates health problems, especially among the most vulnerable groups. At the same time, a lack of development also has adverse effects upon health.

How can we achieve sustainable development and protect our environment and health?

Our guest today has a special interest in the issues of health, environment and development. He is Dr. Wilfried Kreisel, Director of the Division of Environmental Health for the World Health Organization, or WHO. A national of Germany, Dr. Kreisel will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Ian Steele of The Press Foundation of Asia, Yvette Collymore of Inter Press Service, and Anthony Goodman of Reuters.

Before we talk to Dr. Kreisel, let's look at one country's experience in promoting development and providing health care. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports.

**NARRATION:**

Anastasie Neutchap is benefitting from a project that aims at meeting basic health needs but also encourages low-income women like her to become self-sufficient. It's one way Cameroon and other African countries are finding inexpensive ways of providing services despite acute economic hardship.

At this women's centre in the capital, Yaounde, family health care has been combined with training for marketable skills. Run by the Cameroon Ministry of Social and Women's Affairs, it's a concept now used by 24 women's centres. Here, some 300 mothers and infants attend daily. In addition to health services, there's instruction in child care and preventive medicine. Today's topic is diarrhoea, the cause of a large proportion of infant deaths in Cameroon.

Supported by the UN Population Fund, classes also emphasize family planning. Contraceptives are made available at minimal cost. As a result, Anastasie only wants to have three children. She's opposed to larger families.

**ANASTASIE NEUTCHAP: (IN FRENCH)**
"No, it's too much trouble. Because when you have too many children, you can't take care of them properly. Someone might take them away."

**NARRATION:**
The UN Children's Fund and the UN World Food Programme are helping provide the centres with kitchen utensils and food. Mothers learn how to prepare nutritious food using commonly available ingredients. A great number of children in Cameroon are malnourished, not because food is lacking, but because it's not used efficiently. The idea of combining services ranging from health to skill training is gaining ground.

**VICTORINE KOM: (IN FRENCH)**
"It's new for the housewives. We have created this centre to help women who need it -- especially their children."

**NARRATION:**
The Centre also has a three-year programme in dressmaking. These young women sell the clothes they sew and embroider. Ten per cent of the income is set aside to help them start their own small businesses. It's an important step in helping them prepare for the challenge of making a living in hard times.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Dr. Kreisel, we've just seen mention of the problem of diarrhoea from bad food and water in developing countries which have serious problems with environmental degradation. What are the other diseases that are preoccupying WHO in this field of environmental protection?

**DR. KREISEL:** Well, as this short introduction has shown, the problems associated with lack of development and those associated with development are of course at the centre of concern. And in the area of the diseases which refer to the lack of development, the diarrhoeal diseases in children indeed are the most important ones. And you may know that annually more than 3 million children die of diarrhoeal diseases. This is an incredible number, and if you would count it by the second, while I am speaking a number have died.

As far as the diseases are concerned that result from development, of course, we have the problems of urban air pollution which are associated with a number of diseases, including asthma. We have the chemicals problem, the hazardous wastes, the pesticides being used in agriculture where annually about 2 to 3 million people are poisoned and about 300,000 die annually.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So which is worse, underdevelopment producing disease, or -- you use the term "sustainable development", but that can also produce disease, as you've just mentioned. How can you balance the two?

**DR. KREISEL:** I think sustainable development as we understand it should be a development that protects resources so that future generations can live healthy lives. However, the term so far has not been given attention in actual national development plans. The United Nations Conference on Environment Development requests countries to develop plans for sustainable development. And I believe that these plans will have to be supported by the industrialized countries in particular if those countries in the developing world are determined to develop.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The young woman from Cameroon we just saw in the video mentioned that she intends to have no more than three children. Is WHO also involved in the problem of the population explosion? Is it trying to hold it down?

**DR. KREISEL:** The WHO has a programme which is called Human Reproduction. It's more a research program which of course deals with issues related to developing family planning procedures. But in WHO's programmes at country level, population issues normally are at the centre of concern.

**STEELE:** Dr. Kreisel, what's WHO's main practical role in environment development and the linkages, interrelationship with health? Is it one of research, advocacy, promotion of issues? Or does it go to the ground level through programmes and programmes supporting developing countries?

**DR. KREISEL:** WHO has actually two main roles. One is technical cooperation at country level, at field level; the other is normative functions, that is to develop criteria, guidelines, which are internationally acceptable. And I myself have worked for 10 years in Asia at the field level working with governments and implementing programmes in the field of environmental quality management. So WHO has a dual role.

**STEELE:** Almost everybody within the UN system or the family has some connection with environment. We saw at the Earth Summit in Brazil last year almost everyone was on the bandwagon. And what makes WHO's role special? And how far can you go before you start trespassing all over the place on somebody else's turf?

**DR. KREISEL:** The preparatory process that led to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development saw major emphasis being given to the global issues of climate change, ozone depletion, et cetera. WHO in fact tried to introduce the basics of development, that is, looking really at the provision of safe water, safe food, housing, and of course look at the consequences that development brings about. And WHO actually was instrumental in bringing health onto the agenda, health into the centre of concern about environmental development.

I think the first principle in the Rio Declaration, if I may refer to this, is actually a reflection to this. It says human beings are at the centre of concern of sustainable development; they're entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. This is a very fundamental principle which is a first in the Rio Declaration. And I think WHO was quite instrumental in bringing this to the forefront.

**COLLYMORE:** Dr. Kreisel, looking at the diseases in the field, particularly in developing countries, I know that African countries in particular are a bit concerned that with the AIDS epidemic perhaps organizations like WHO are losing sight of diarrhoeal diseases and malaria and things like that. Is this a concern that you're aware of?

**DR. KREISEL:** Certainly the AIDS pandemic in Africa is a major problem. It is a catastrophe. And all efforts have to be made to contain this disease. But WHO I think does not forget the other issues related to health and environment. And a reflection of this indeed is the development of a new Global Strategy on Health and Environment, which is a response of WHO to the United Nations Conference in Rio. This strategy is being considered by the forthcoming World Health Assembly in May, and as the Executive Board has already discussed it in January, I believe the World Health Assembly will fully endorse it. This will give us a new mandate to move actively in the field of health and environment, in particular responding to the programmes which have been adopted by UNCED.

**COLLYMORE:** Can you just say what -- is there a major challenge, one that stands out more than any other?

**DR. KREISEL:** There are of course a myriad of challenges. But I think what we would like to see really at the centre of concern is the urbanization issue and the health and environmental consequences. That is, we know that by the year 2000 more than 50 per cent of the world population will live in cities. And the crunch of environmental health problems is actually in the cities. When you look at the cholera epidemic in Latin America, it was in the big cities where the problems were so serious, because of the crowding, because of the very difficult situation with regard to housing, water quality, et cetera.

**GOODMAN:** Dr. Kreisel, would you say that the impact of development and environment on health is something that mankind's only been conscious of since, say, the industrial revolution, or has this impinged on society throughout history?

**DR. KREISEL:** I believe that the environment always has been the primary determinant of human health, but humans have been able to cope with the environment individually and as a community -- by improving their own shelters, by eating food which was in accordance with the climatic conditions in which they lived. That means they have been able to determine their own, let's say, life. Now we have a situation where it is very difficult to cope individually with one's own environment. Of course, if you look at lifestyles, it's a different problem. But if I live in a big city, I'm exposed to urban air pollution and I cannot escape. Unless I go into the countryside where I will not find the employment that I need. So there is a difference in the previous attitude towards the environment and the current situation which we face.

**GOODMAN:** And perhaps 75 per cent of the problem is the fantastic growth in world population in the last hundred years, perhaps.

**DR. KREISEL:** I must admit that the WHO Commission on Health and Environment, which was the major input that WHO had to the Conference in Rio -- which was chaired, by the way, by Madame Simone Veil, the former Minister of Health of France and the former President of the European Parliament -- put the greatest emphasis on the population issue.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The programme is World Chronicle, our guest is Dr. Wilfried Kreisel, Director of the Division of Environmental Health for the World Health Organization. Ian Steele.

**STEELE:** Dr. Kreisel, part of your function is to attract public attention to the issues, but I wonder to what extent this public attention to issues through conferences such as the Environment Conference shape your work. In other words, what impact has the sudden demand and interest in the environment had on the way in which WHO goes about its work, shapes its programmatic responses and addresses health? Has there been a circling of the wagons around the environment issue? Has it changed the way in which you relate and go about your business, or WHO goes about its business, in any particular way?

**DR. KREISEL:** The WHO has had an environmental health programme for the past 42 years. We have been involved in water supply and sanitation from the very beginning. We have been involved in food safety problems from the very early days of WHO. The conference in Rio I think is a milestone, however, in that we have reached an agreed upon agenda for the '90s and beyond, that is a programme of action to which all countries have agreed. That has completely changed the situation. Before, country X has said this, country Y has said that. WHO now has a basis, which is the "Agenda 21", on which we can base our future work. It does not mean that we forget about what we have been doing, but there is an additional impetus, an additional basis from which to move forward.

**STEELE:** Have you seen that in the reception that your advocacy has had in developing countries, or are they constrained by the same economic circumstances as always, and they say, well yes, this is a great idea, but we don't have the money? What can you do about that?

**DR. KREISEL:** You point to a real problem. And that is that at the bottom line the money is decisive. If you don't have money, you can not do very much. Of course you can do something, but not very much. And the conference in Rio of course has made many promises, made many pledges, et cetera; however, the conference fell into a time of economic recession worldwide. That is, basically the promises that were made at Rio have not been met. The financial mechanisms, for example, GEF, the Global Environment Facility, have only partly been strengthened, such as being increased in funding from $1.3, $1.4 to $3 billion, which was said at Rio; or the "Capacity 21", a capacity building programme in which UNDP has a lead role.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The UN Development Programme.

**DR. KREISEL:** That's right, the United Nations Development Programme. They have said a target of $500 million by the year 1995 was possible, and by 1992, the end of 1992, about $50 million. At actual rate, we have $20 to $25 million now. That is, the financial situation after UNCED is not, by far, as good as everybody expected at the time of UNCED. And Member States of course would like to see fulfilment of these promises. And I believe that in this regard the high-level Commission on Sustainable Development which the United Nations Conference has established will play a major role, because it is also supposed to monitor the financial flow. That is, to take stock of what has happened since Rio and make it public, remind the world leaders of their promises made in Rio. And the basic question indeed is should environmental protection be compromised at times of economic recession.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But Dr. Kreisel, all the talking in the world is not going to produce this money if there is an economic recession and there simply -- you can't get governments to fork it over.

**DR. KREISEL:** Absolutely. But what I just raised, the question is whether one should not really put the protection of the environment, of the quality of the environment, above the economic issues, because environmental protection, as we know, in the long term will pay off. It is not that you have two different shoes, on the one hand environmental protection, on the other hand you have economic growth. I think you need to look at this as one and the same.

**COLLYMORE:** Dr. Kreisel, I'd like to go back to the point you made about population and the fact that it's seen as one of the major issues in the whole debate. Is it still a large point of difference between developed and developing countries that in fact population on its own is not the problem but just a symptom of the problem, and poverty has to be addressed before you can hope to get any answers out of this population question?

**DR. KREISEL:** Well, I think this is a fundamental question, because population growth is actually very closely linked to the level of education, the standards of living of the population. And we know very well that a woman who is educated, who knows about her environment, would have less children, fewer children. So if one starts with education, you have to do this of course as part of a process which is called poverty alleviation. It is one and the same. You educate, you reduce poverty, and you reduce

population growth, so population growth cannot be isolated from the basic problem of poverty alleviation as well as education.

**COLLYMORE:** How is the WHO dealing with that, and what kind of education are you talking about?

**DR. KREISEL:** At the field level, WHO has major projects that deal, for example, with hygiene education, or the involvement of communities in their own projects. Let the communities run the projects; empower the communities to do their own work. That is, I think, the major aim of most of the projects that WHO carries out at field level, at community level: community empowerment, giving them the help to run their own fate. I think that's the idea of the work of WHO. And that of course may lead in the medium term and long term also to poverty alleviation. If you tell a community how to grow certain foodstuff, you help them to improve their living.

**GOODMAN:** Dr. Kreisel, since the banning of fossil fuels is one of the great contributors to the degradation of the environment, does the WHO have a policy like the International Atomic Energy Agency of supporting nuclear energy, and encouraging it?

**DR. KREISEL:** WHO's position towards nuclear energy has been laid down in several documents that were published by, among others, the European regional office of the World Health Organization. The Commission on Health and Environment of WHO has clearly stated that nuclear energy is not the right form of energy for developing countries. Because you need extremely stable societies in order to run power which requires not only political but economic stability as well. And we did not say, the Commission did not say that the developed world should get out of nuclear energy or should stay with nuclear energy, they only stated that it was not actually suitable for developing countries.

And there are other reasons for this, apart from the climate issues. The security, the safety problem. Because the disposal of radioactive waste, the reprocessing of material at this stage still poses serious threats. And there's no safe method of disposal yet to which we can agree.

**GOODMAN:** So then two UN agencies take rather opposite or rather different viewpoints on this, you and the IAEA.

**DR. KREISEL:** As we have indicated, we are certainly promoting a safe energy, and if you look at nuclear energy, look at Chernobyl, you may certainly have your reservations to support it.

**GOODMAN:** No objections to solar energy, I take it.

**DR. KREISEL:** Solar energy of course is in many ways a very important energy for WHO's projects. In running, for example, refrigerators in the field to cool the vaccines which have to be available at community level, and many others. Solar pumping for water supply. Or desalination for water supplies using solar energy. It's a very important energy source for many of WHO's activities.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Dr. Kreisel, you mentioned the problem of urbanization. Are you trying to encourage governments in developing countries to send their people back to the land rather than having them concentrated more and more in cities?

**DR. KREISEL:** Well, this is a very important, very difficult question to answer. WHO I think is aware of the fact that you cannot stop urbanization. It is a fact of life that the employment situation in cities is better than in the rural areas. Of course, we know that if one would be in a position to improve the rural environment, maybe the migration into the cities would not take place to such a degree. But this is a very, very long-term process. So in order to really minimize or mitigate the health problems associated with urbanization, one should address actually how can you cope with the problems that arise in cities. That is, you may have to establish, as we do this, healthy city networks which exchange information on ways how to cope with particular problems of waste disposal or safe food storage and so on. I think we are more trying to cope with the existing situation rather than trying this very long-term goal of having a rural environment which is more conducive.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Dr. Kreisel, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle.

Our guest has been Dr. Wilfried Kreisel, Director of the Division of Environmental Health for the World Health Organization. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Ian Steele of The Press Foundation of Asia, Yvette Collymore of Inter Press Service, and Anthony Goodman of Reuters.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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